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AUTHOR Billings, Simone J.

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of 4 university instructors teaching a first-year composition class and of 16 of their students (4 for each instructor) randomly selected. Parts of the interviews, parts of the think-aloud protocols, and parts of the instructors' written comments are examined--the focus is on the way that students and teachers approach instructors' written comments on students' papers. Here students and instructors play out their respective tasks with certain "lines" already given by the "playwright," the educational environment; however, these "actors" could also "improvise" as they saw fit within certain parameters, such as adapting to the perceived needs of specific audiences. According to Louise Rosenblatt (1978), instructor commentary is part of a transactional event. This study identified five sequential periods in this transactional event: (1) students writing in response to a prompt; (2) instructors reading drafts and writing responses; (3) students reading instructor commentary and revising their essays; (4) instructors reading student revisions and writing responses; and (5) students reading instructor commentary on revisions. Throughout these sequential periods students and instructors manifested certain common patterns in making meaning out of each others' texts and their own. They read each other's texts primarily for content, assess each other's texts to some degree, plan what to do as a result of reading each other's texts. But these instructors and students also shift their perspectives according to the stage in this transactional event they are in, interpreting contexts also according to elements outside the particular period of the sequence. (NKA)

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THE STORY OF SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES: HOW INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS CONSTRUCT AND USE INSTRUCTORS' COMMENTS ON DRAFTS AND FINAL VERSIONS

Simone J. Billings
Santa Clara University

S. Billings

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Good morning. Today I will discuss a portion of a study I conducted of four university instructors teaching a first-year composition class and of sixteen of their students (four for each instructor).

Today, however, I will use only a portion of the data--parts of the interviews, parts of the think-aloud protocols, and parts of the instructors' written comments--focusing on the way that the students and teachers approach instructors' written comments on students' papers.

First a word about the subjects to provide the context. All are from a single university, a private, liberal arts, Catholic and Jesuit university. Students were randomly selected from the classes. I do not offer these students and instructors as representative of all students and instructors at large, or even of all at small, private, liberal arts universities; I offer them to show how these genuine students and genuine instructors construct meaning when they are genuinely involved in an actual class.

I reiterate the term *genuine* because beginning with the seminal work of

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Nancy Sommers ("Responding to Student Writing," *CCC*, 1982) and continuing through the present with Connors and Lunsford "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers" (*CCC*, 1993), and Straub and Lunsford *12 Readers Reading* (1995), researchers of instructors' response to student writing have often studied part of the whole complex of written response to student writing: for example, the student reactions and perceptions or the written text of instructors' response. Those studies provide fine insight and categories for researchers and practitioners alike to consider when they examine or make written comments on student writing. However, as Straub and Lunsford acknowledge, "the only way to get a definite view of teachers' actual ways of responding is to study responses from their own actual classroom settings, optimally, as they unfold" (5). And that was my project: to examine instructor commentary not in isolated parts but in the context of writing classes. Here students and instructors play out their expected roles as readers and writers trying to construct meaning in their respective tasks with certain "lines" already given by the "playwright," the educational environment; however, these "actors" also could "improvise" as they saw fit within certain parameters, such as adapting to the perceived needs of specific audiences.

Such improvisation, adaptation, demonstrates the way that instructor commentary is part of a transactional event: as defined by Louise Rosenblatt (1978), a transaction is "an ongoing process in which the elements or factors. . .aspects of a total situation, [are] each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (17).

Essentially, from my study I identified five sequential periods in this

transactional event. In brief, they are (1) students writing in response to a prompt; (2) instructors reading drafts and writing responses; (3) students reading instructor commentary and revising their essays; (4) instructors reading student revisions and writing responses; and (5) students reading instructor commentary on revisions.

These five sequential periods remind me, as a practitioner, of something I sometimes forget--that in approaching instructors' written comments on student papers, students and instructors both begin as readers: students read the writing prompt and of course are the intended audience of instructors' written comments; instructors have the students' drafts to read before writing their comments on them. However, figuring into how these two sets of readers approach instructors' written comments are elements from times earlier in the transaction than the first set of written instructor commentary.

For example, as readers of student essays, instructors consider not just the pieces themselves but several other factors, considerations illustrating the sensitivity to context which instructors demonstrate. For instance, one instructor planned her end comments meticulously, reviewing any prewriting students had done, in keeping with her classroom emphasis on process, so that she could tie her comments to topics discussed in class. Another expressed concern for students' feelings and reactions before leaping into writing the end comment, particularly for one who had left her office in tears following the first conference.

Yet perhaps her concern was unnecessary. When interviewed, these students, at least, all said they figured instructors provided commentary on drafts just to help students "make it [the paper] better." When asked about the specific

instructor commentary, these students did not report awareness of instructors' attempts to be non-judgmental but noted as helpful the positive feedback and specificity of direction. In general, none reported being particularly upset by anything an instructor had written so long as the student agreed with what the instructor had said or so long as the student had expected the instructor to make certain comments. One student, for example, noted, "I knew that it was real bad, so I was ready for this one: if she said it was really bad or. . .y'know if this belong [*sic*] in the garbage can, fine." The affective dimension students associated with instructors' comments on drafts seemed connected not to instructors' tone but to the particular advice provided: whether students either agreed with the observations or believed they could follow through on the advice given.

In looking further at how students assess texts when reading instructor commentary on their drafts [overhead two], we see that they evaluated their own text positively 30% of the time. When composing their drafts, however, students had only negatively regarded their own texts. Instructors' written comments, then, might have provided glimmers of hope to these students, a significant change. Those features of their own text they were assessing negatively were often those spots where instructors had pointed out problems to students, so the comments helped students join in that assessment.

Yet notice that students were also negatively assessing the instructors' comments, those texts painstakingly and carefully constructed. Occasionally these students were complaining about their instructors' handwriting, but they also were indicating their disagreement with what they believed instructors meant or their

lack of understanding what the instructor was trying to communicate--e.g., "I don't understand why she wants me to do that."

Mostly, however, students were trying to change according to their instructors' feedback. As readers about to be revisers, students now were constrained by three texts: the writing prompt, their draft, and their instructors' written comments on their drafts. In constructing their original drafts, they had often repeated parts of the prompt or paraphrases of the prompt as if a mantra while working to narrow the topic so as to bring that element somewhat under their control; when they had instructors' written comments on their draft, they tried to modify their intended texts to match not just the writing prompt but the notations and recommendations for change instructors made in their written comments about their drafts. As readers, students had to interpret instructor commentary, as illustrated by the following comments from some talkaloud protocols:

> [You] "`would have had an easier time being original'" around "`an artifact'" . . ."`about an artifact less commonly identified.'" such as weird
>
> "`You do include some convincing examples in paragraph 2--'" but you don't convince. . .

In these instances, if the students' paraphrases did not truly match the instructors' intended meaning, the student might not have made the changes desired by the instructor.

Turning now to how instructors assess texts notice that they also negatively assess their own text, which they have when reading student revisions. One instructor noted about her own text that

> One thing I always wonder when a student has rewritten a paper that's very weak, and I'm wondering about this student, is the first paper can be so bad sometimes that you obviously can't talk about everything that's bad, and yet students seem sometimes upset and confused when they rewrite the paper and are told that there are some ... other areas that weren't mentioned in the conference that were weak. For example, this, her introduction, is really terrible, but the paper was so bad in other ways that I didn't even mention the introduction.

Instructors, therefore, can be seen to be concerned not just with how students had used their written comments to revise drafts but with their own processes as instructor-writers and with their own texts.

And they do not misplace this concern with how students perceive their comments on final versions, for their students read their comments on the revised essays closely. These students read and responded to what their instructors had written, considering precisely what their instructors had hoped they would, whether something about word choice or about their procedures for future papers. These students constructed the purpose of instructor commentary to be justification of assessments, rereading either their own texts or the instructors' to understand the assessments. Both students and instructors had said when interviewed that they regarded written commentary on revisions as justifications for assessments and recommendations for work in future assignments; instructors perceived their role in the institutional drama to be grade-givers and grade-justifiers; students similarly expected their instructors to fulfill that role. Yet an extended dialogue existed

between these instructors and these students, an extension that demonstrates not just the transactional nature of this event but the individual elements students used to construct their environments, their contexts, as readers. Students also increased the amount of negative assessment of instructor text and intended to continue the dialogue beyond the period studied, stating they were going to see the instructors to clarify certain issues (although I should note that these instructors and students connected, i.e., understood what each other meant, more than they misconnected).

Also telling of the complexity of instructors' written comments on student papers is not only examination of how instructors and students assess instructor commentary but also a comparison of what instructors plan as goals for students and what they actually write in their comments and a comparison of instructors' goals for students and the students' goals for themselves.

On drafts these instructors consider goals for the content of student essays the most (55%), and their written comments do indeed note that feature of student drafts the most (43%), even more heavily if one collapses the categories of topic selection and content (59% total). On drafts, these instructors plan goals for students' procedures, what students ought to do, next most frequently (27%), and their written comments reflect that order of importance though not to the same degree (only 15%) as when they were considering students' goals. On drafts these instructors note aspects of structure, the organization, 16% of the time and write 14% of their comments on that feature of student text. And although on drafts these instructors have considered rhetorical

goals for students in only 2% of their talkalouds, they devote 6% of their written comments to that feature.

In contrast, on revisions these instructors shift their emphases both in their goals for students and in their written comments. Now procedures students follow and all features of student text are mentioned. Since students will most likely not revise these particular essays further, instructors consider more the procedures students did and will use (49%) rather than the content (24%) when planning what goals to suggest for students. Yet their written comments continue to remark on content the most: 40%, 45% if topic selection is folded in. These instructors next write most about organization, 24%, even though they had considered structure for students as a goal only 4% of the time they were planning students' goals. When reading revisions, these instructors are not the grammar mavens imagined by most students; rather, they are concerned with the global features of student text and the processes students use to write.

And the students. . .were their behaviors affected by instructors' written commentary? [overhead five] Comparing student goals for themselves before receiving any instructors feedback to those after receiving comments, we see that in both cases these students plan for their content predominantly, but they increase the amount of emphasis they give to their own procedural goals when they're working on revisions. Perhaps this change results from students already having some content to work with in revisions, but recall also that on the drafts instructors had provided students with advice about their procedures next most often after advice about content. Recall also that I have already noted that students assessed

their own text more positively than they had before receiving instructor feedback. We can infer, therefore, that student behavior may indeed have been affected by their instructors' written comments.

I have provided just an overview of the fact that, throughout five sequential periods, these students and instructors manifested certain common patterns in making meaning out of each others' texts and their own. They read each other's texts primarily for content, assess each others' text to some degree, plan what to do as a result of reading each others' texts. But these instructors and students also shift their perspectives according to the stage in this transactional event they are in, interpreting contexts also according to elements outside the particular period of the sequence. As readers about to become writers when they're revising their drafts, students play the roles of dutiful readers of instructors' written comments, conditioned by years within the larger educational setting to try to make sense of instructors' commentary and to follow the advice they perceive as directions rather than suggestions on drafts; these students are, however, less accepting of criticism on revisions. Instructors, on the other hand, seen as readers about to become writers are also constrained by texts--the writing prompt, the student essays, and their own written commentary--and perceive their roles as readers affected by additional elements of the transactional event: the specific classes they've been teaching, the particular students they're writing to, the phase of the transaction they're in.

I must note that my study is descriptive rather than prescriptive: it highlights practices that perhaps were heretofore undetected and provides suggestions of

what might further be studied. For I think sometimes, when we examine only one of the parts, such as the written comments, in isolation, we lose the richness, the fullness, of the actors in this educational endeavor; we can overlook, for example, the ways in which I have shown instructors and students as readers must deal with elements of an entire complex nested within what we commonly refer to or study as simply instructors' written comments on student papers.

Thank you.